

'The Crumbling Of Sand Castles'

By Tim O'Brien

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BEFORE JANUARY, 1960, I was aware that a man named Eisenhower was President. But John F. Kennedy was the first President I truly knew—whose movements were familiar, whose voice and manner and physical presence were real, whose private life had been made public to me.

I was 14 when he was elected. I was 17 when he died. I was young.

His death did not traumatize me, but it did introduce me to grief. His was my first funeral, and though I mourned before a television set and not before a wooden coffin, it was a funeral and nothing else. I was a bit wide-eyed, self-conscious, even before the TV. I tried to maintain a certain dignity, and at times I succeeded and other times I did not. I was new to grief, but I understood how it must be handled. It is a confrontation between pure sadness and the emotions of helplessness and anger that come with the crumbling of sand castles. In grief, there is terrible sadness, but there is also terrible disillusionment. Disillusionment in the strict sense—the shedding of mistaken ideas, the explosion of fictions such as permanence and grand idealism and invulnerability.

VULNERABLE. When Kennedy was killed, I felt vulnerable through and through. My own tissue was youthful looking, but it was finally vulnerable. It was then that I understood that the fine and beautiful fictions I lived by had little power against the stark facts of reality and biology.

The reality was my teacher on that Friday afternoon. "Sic semper tyrannis," he said, always loving to puncture emotion. "Sic semper tyrannis. Thus always to tyrants."

Even then it had started. Iconolatry and iconoclasm.

"You have to stand back from all this," he said. "It's terrible, I know. But you'll have to view it as history, because that's what it is now—history. Okay. Who said sic semper tyrannis?"

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There was no anger in the classroom. Blank stares, bewilderment. The teacher was just too old, he had seen too much. And we were too young.

"Don't you know he was ruthless?"

I don't care.

"Don't you know his principles were uncertain, masked by clever wit?"

I don't care.

"Don't you know he was a politician? Don't you know anything about politicians?"

No. And I don't care. It doesn't matter.

"For Pete's sake. He was only human."

Not quite. Not exactly.

And biology. "Did you know that Abraham Lincoln was shot in the same place?" said a friend that day. "In the back of the skull, just below the ear. My God, can you imagine the sound it must make as you die, everything blowing up and out, everything exploding, eardrums popping?"

"Can you hear the wit exploding? Pow, splash. It was all lying in the back seat of that limousine, just splattered against the upholstery."

DURING KENNEDY'S presidency I was unaware that high politics was ever anything other than it was then, in the early '60s.

I was not an uncommonly stupid high school student. Nor uncommonly naive. But, other than what I had learned from Kennedy, I knew nothing about the manner in which Presidents comport themselves.

I found nothing unusual in his elegance. Nothing unusual in his promises for social justice or his patent commitment to making it happen. It did not occur to me that I would ever distrust a President, or feel betrayed by one or feel anything but keen admiration. I appreciated his style and even tried to copy it in sly ways, lengthening my A's and tilting my head. But I believed I was appreciating and copying presidential traits, not traits peculiarly Kennedy's.

In the prairie country of southern Minnesota where I grew up—12 miles from Iowa, 45 miles from South Dakota—Kennedy was not particularly loved. There even ran a deep vein of distaste for him, especially among some of the people who lived on farms, also among some of those who ran the town's small businesses. But I remember no rabid hate. No talk of impeachment. No cheering in Worthington Senior High when the intercom announcement interrupted Miss Wick's English class.

I cannot say I felt any particular love for Kennedy—no more than any other kid my age. Nor is it true that Kennedy alone molded my social perspective. Mine was the generation more of Pete Seeger than John Kennedy. During Kennedy's presidency we

drove to the shores of Lake Okabena and engaged in a ritual that now would make high school students snicker. Even to me it now seems impossible.

We sang folk songs: "Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing . . ." "What have they done to the rain?" "How many roads must a man walk down, before they will call him a man?" "If I had a hammer, I'd hammer out . . . freedom and justice all over this land." Our songs were not about acid or moony-eyed love or hot rods or God.

We sat by campfires and sang about justice, and that was our great sand castle.

IT IS IMPORTANT to understand that my generation—those of us whose first life-and-blood President was John Kennedy—was the same generation that spilled the most blood in Vietnam and that simultaneously called most vocally for an end to that war.

Irony? Schizophrenia? We hated the war, many of us; we fought the war, many of us. In some cases, my own included, those who hated the war also fought it. Some of us went to Canada, but not many of us; some of us went to jail rather than fight, but not many of us.

Whether our behavior was rational or stupid, the apparent schizophrenia may have been more a symptom of our trust in politics. The trust ebbed and finally drained dry near the turn of the decade, but no matter. We trusted that justice would prevail and that it could be sought and achieved through American politics. It was a leftover from the Kennedy years.

He set our sights terribly high. The fall was no fun at all. It angered us, turned us sour. Many of us felt we'd been fooled. But the gyroscope had been inbred. The reference point for our anger and bitterness was what had been implanted so early, and if it were belted with a sledgehammer it would not go away. We dropped out, some of us. We turned to fantasy, some of us. We fought to the bitter end, some of us—through McCarthy and Robert Kennedy and McGovern.

And through the decade we were outraged by things that did not so easily outrage others. We were outraged that the world would not abide by the purity of the idealism we had learned from our first teacher.

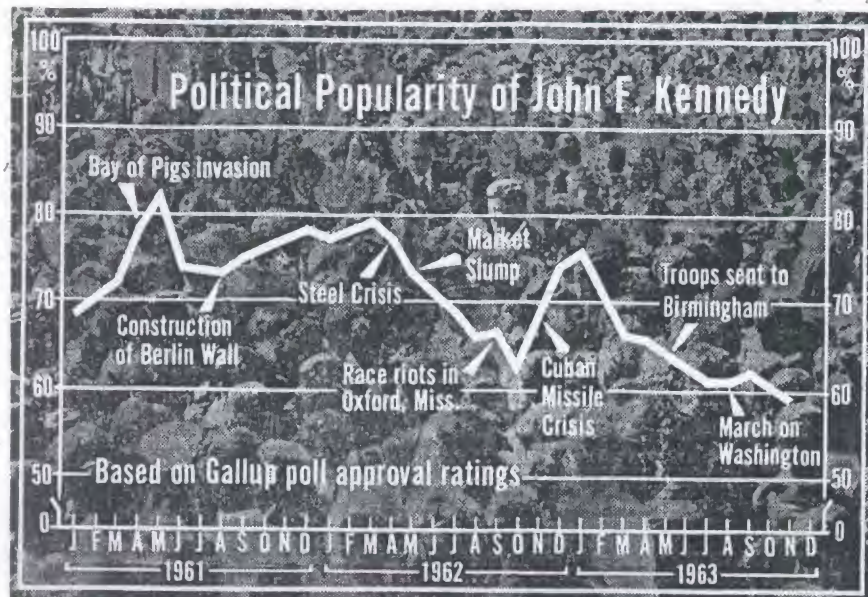
VIETNAM, May, 1969. "This is Kennedy's war, you know," a lieutenant said. "You can blame it on Johnson and Nixon, but it won't take away from the fact that it's Kennedy's war."

There were no Pentagon Papers then, but I doubt it would have mattered, for it does not matter now.

"You're crazy," I said. "You're crazy."

"Sir," he said.

"You're crazy, sir."



By Ken Burgess—The Washington Post

"That's the ticket. But you're fighting Kennedy's war."

"He would have found another way."

"There was no other way."

"Then he would have manufactured a way."

"He was a politician. You're too young to remember that. He was a politico. He couldn't let South Vietnam go down the drain, he wouldn't have allowed it. He had to balance all the bosses and generals and weapons manufacturers. He was being attacked for softness on the Commies, and there wasn't a thing he was going to do to stop this war."

"It doesn't matter. He didn't live . . . he didn't have the chance . . . it doesn't matter."

"Look, you have to accept the facts. Those are the facts. I'm just telling you the facts."

THROUGH GRADUATE school at Harvard and my time in Washington I have had similar conversations. Once a teacher remarked that it was terribly sad that Kennedy had not generated the legislative suc-

cesses to complement a leadership style so few men have. And though I found other than gut defenses for Kennedy, I find in my thinking now that I search for those defenses rather than approach the evidence neutrally and let it take me where it may.

I invoke the name Kennedy as others who search for heroes invoke the names of Sgt. York, T. E. Lawrence, Pericles, Audie Murphy, Ulysses, Jason. There are no halfway heroes. Flaws of character must be chalked off as obstacles put there by fate. They must be seen as elements of tension in an epic struggle and the whole tragedy must be cleansed.

So for 10 years I have defended Kennedy. Almost instinctively. With thoughtful enough words but for no other reason than to protect against the spoiling of a great tragedy. And, too, to defend myself. It is all quite natural. He was President when I was young.